



FRANK McGHEE says: 'Charlton's left no room for excuses'

JACK CHARLTON could not, dare not, take his eyes off the damage Wycombe's amateurs were doing to his proud professional Middlesbrough team. Not even for long enough to look at his watch.

"How long to go?" he asked as he dropped another of the twenty half-smoked, half-shredded cigarettes littered around his feet. "Ten minutes? I don't think I can live that long."

The Middlesbrough manager, whose career experiences have included extra time in a World Cup final, an FA Cup Final replay and all those up-and-down years as a player with Leeds, swore to me afterwards that nothing in his life has ever stretched him on the rack as Wycombe Wanderers did in this 0-0 FA Cup third round tie on the slopes of their Loakes Park pitch.

Different

Yet by blaming that pitch for everything that happened, Charlton has left himself with no room for excuses in tomorrow's replay on the broad flat surface of First Division Ayresome Park.

He is unrepentant about it. He said: "The replay will be so different. I give Wycombe no chance. I wouldn't back them with bad money."

"All right, we didn't play well, but then it is impossible to play well on this ground. When you hit a ball down the hill it goes out of play. When you hit a ball up the hill, it slows down and stops."

"The only way to do it is to kick and chase, and that is not our game. That is Wycombe's game, and all we could do against it was keep men back behind the ball."

Deluded

In all the many years I've known Charlton he has always been honest, sometimes brutally, self-destructively honest.

But I can't help wondering whether he is deluding himself this time.

I feel that the real truth is too many Middlesbrough players allowed that slope to loom like a mountain in their imaginations from the moment they walked out an hour before the match.

Half a dozen of them promptly decided: "We can't possibly play on

Jack's happy after day on the rack

this"—and, bluntly, half a dozen of them didn't really attempt to play.

Instead of going out there with a swagger and a flourish to display their attacking skills, Middlesbrough performed with only two forwards up-field, which has never been the way to win a match with honour—or to spread the gospel of entertainment.

Wycombe keeper John Maskell was tested just once in each half.

Middlesbrough keeper Jim Platt wasn't tested at all that often either—partly because Wycombe's two best scoring attempts flew inches wide and partly because two of the few colleagues performing at something like First Division level were the two big men directly in front of him—central defenders Willie Maddren and Stuart Boam.

Even they were forced in the end to abandon any pretence of starting counter-attacks during the blitz that frightened the daylights out of Charlton—kicking the ball anywhere just to get a few seconds of relief.

That sloping pitch is a poor excuse

By James Lawton

JACK CHARLTON promises a ritual slaughter of WYCOMBE on the wide, well manicured reaches of Ayresome Park.

MIDDLESBROUGH, he argues, were hugely handicapped by the north face of the Wycombe pitch. It apparently explained a performance so limp in spirit and barren in ideas that the only time I truly sensed the presence of a First Division side was when Willie Maddren and Graeme Souness twice decided that cynical fouls were the only way out of tight situations.

From some of the platitude-punching characters in Football League management, the "sloping pitch" excuses would scarcely raise an eyebrow. Coming from a man as bold and as honest as Jack Charlton I find them particularly depressing.

Low-risk policy

Certainly the 0-0 draw carried a somewhat harsher message for me. It was that the old aristocracy of First Division football has gone.

In its place are teams like Middlesbrough, who find it possible to rise to positions of prominence on a low risk policy of defensive football, which includes a capacity to counter-attack.

Wycombe, of course, do not know about such subtleties. They go out to play football with the eccentric idea that it is something to be enjoyed, that winning games is about taking the play to your opponents, employing all the skill at their disposal.

Middlesbrough found that level of skill an embarrassing revelation and I suspect it may yet give them a twinge of apprehension before the tie is over.

Wycombe manager Brian Lee accepts that Jack Charlton is probably right when he says tomorrow's replay will be an entirely different game. What he cannot accept—like me—is Middlesbrough's willingness to blame the Wycombe pitch for their failure on Saturday.

He says: "I am disappointed in this. I would accept it if they said 'we didn't like the pitch.' That's fair enough. But to blame your performance on a pitch, well that's too much, coming from professionals."

"Are England going to use that as an excuse when they play in Cyprus? Surely professional footballers should have the skill and ability to adapt to different situations."

Only Souness showed consistent spirit and effort for Middlesbrough, and had he not been so committed at least to survival, Wycombe, I'm sure, would now be in the haughty company of Burley's conquerors, Wimbledon.